

CRTA:

Long Term Election Observation Report

Local elections in Kosjerić and Zaječar

May 2025. ————— Summary



Summary

While the authorities formally claim to support the implementation of ODIHR recommendations, in practice they continue to foster markedly undemocratic electoral conditions, once again evident in the campaigns in two local communities. **Moreover, the conditions have deteriorated compared to previous elections, as the campaigns in both Zaječar and Kosjerić were marked by the systemic use of both propaganda and physical violence.**

These are the first elections held in the context of a historic wave of social mobilization, sparked by the collapse of a canopy in Novi Sad that resulted in the death of 16 people and led to ongoing student and civic protests that have continued for more than half a year.

The protests triggered more effective grassroots organizing, leading to a more serious opposition challenge in the elections. In response, both national and local authorities escalated their mobilization efforts and resorted to the use of state and public resources, along with other forms of electoral manipulation. The most influential media outlets in the country ran a campaign in support of local ruling party lists.

Pressure on voters in Zaječar (47,357 registered voters) and Kosjerić (8,897 registered voters) extended beyond the “normalized” practices of vote buying and voter intimidation into a rise in verbal and physical violence on the ground.

CRTA's election observation mission documented **71 incidents** during **the final three weeks** of the campaign involving **targeting and intimidation through smear campaigns, verbal and physical violence** against opposition activists, journalists, and citizens; **90 appearances by government officials** in support of local ruling party campaigns; **70 cases** of potential misuse of public resources, official functions, symbols, and activities for party promotion; and nearly **70 instances of misleading political advertising** favoring the ruling party, containing inappropriate and dehumanizing rhetoric in the period immediately before and during the campaign. More than one-third of all government officials' campaign activities nationwide in the final weeks took place in Zaječar and Kosjerić.

Years of systemic manipulation of institutions and laws, combined with the persistent promotion of impunity, have rendered elections in Serbia undemocratic and have encouraged increasingly frequent use of illegitimate and illegal electoral engineering to benefit those in power. The practices observed in the local elections in Zaječar and Kosjerić include:

- **Erosion of the local nature of elections and the blurring of lines between state and ruling party:** As CRTA Observation mission also observed in the December 2023 and June 2024 parliamentary and local elections, the ruling party's campaign **transformed local policy issues into part of a broader national political narrative. The boundary between state and party disappeared again in the figure of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.** His name appeared in the titles of ruling party lists in Zaječar and Kosjerić, despite the fact that **he was neither a candidate nor legally allowed to be one.** This was reinforced by 24 live national broadcasts of his addresses in the final three weeks of the campaign (over 190 since the start of the year) and his appearances at major gatherings in villages during the penultimate week of the campaign. This practice contradicts ODIHR recommendations, which call for a clear distinction between state functions and election campaigning to prevent the abuse of public resources and authority for political purposes and to ensure fair competition.
- **"Satellite" lists and manipulation of electoral options:** In past elections, satellite lists were often associated with the misuse of national minority status or with forged signatures during the certification process in municipal and city offices. These cases were never investigated or resolved in court. The emergence of similar actors in Zaječar and Kosjerić raises new concerns about electoral engineering, misuse of local administration for certifying candidacies, and the tendency of local electoral commissions to ignore questions about the authenticity of candidate lists.
- **Deceptive public information and government propaganda:** The local election campaigns in Zaječar and Kosjerić unfolded in the formal absence of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). Despite this, the content broadcast by the most-watched television and radio stations mirrored previous elections in terms of the volume and type of misleading political advertising, hate speech, and suppression of media pluralism. Even when REM was formally

present in past elections, it was effectively complicit in disseminating such content. This time, the government's propaganda was particularly aimed at "blockaders" (a derogatory term used by the authorities to refer to Students in Blockade and their supporters), who were portrayed for months by top officials, mainstream media, and the public broadcaster RTS as "destroyers of Serbia," actors of a "color revolution," and even labeled "terrorists," "fascists," and "Nazis."

- **Normalization of violence:** Violence becomes more visible in campaigns when elections threaten the ruling party's dominance. The Zaječar and Kosjerić campaigns were conducted in an atmosphere similar to that of the December 2023 elections—marked by inflammatory and dehumanizing rhetoric from media and top officials, and by numerous cases of verbal and physical violence against election actors, citizens, and observers. Violence and intimidation are also central elements of a longer-term social pattern shaped since November 1, 2024, which has spilled over into the local election context. Particularly troubling is the involvement of informal groups in incidents, whose affiliations and instructions remain unknown. Their presence and role in provoking incidents and spreading fear further contributed to an atmosphere of insecurity and intimidation.
- **Encouragement of hostility toward citizen observers and irresponsible use of independent observation mechanisms by actors linked to the authorities and the opposition:** The government's resistance to independent citizen election observation has been evident since the 2023 elections, when CRTA observers were subjected to brutal physical violence, which remains unresolved. In the penultimate week before the Zaječar and Kosjerić elections, several national broadcasters aired a primetime segment titled "NGO Dossier," which directly labeled CRTA a "state enemy." The fact that some of the speakers in this film were top state officials, including the Speaker of the National Assembly, **indicates that the authorities have no intention of recognizing or protecting the role of independent observers as a key element of democratic elections.** Further concern arises from the fact that two newly formed organizations—bearing similar names and dates of registration—will deploy hundreds of observers in Zaječar and Kosjerić, and also groups which participated in previous elections - groups which do not pursue genuine observation goals. **In most cases, the members of these observation missions can be linked to structures of the ruling party or the opposition, which further points to the irresponsible undermining of**

the role, purpose, and values of election observation by political actors, aimed at increasing their presence at polling stations outside of official election boards.

- **The voter register as a source of distrust due to uninvestigated manipulation and lack of revision:** Despite a comprehensive audit of the voter register being among the top ODIHR recommendations, these local elections once again proceeded without it. Perpetrators of electoral abuses related to the voter register remain shielded by the principle of impunity for election-related crimes. Perceptions of the register in Zaječar and Kosjerić are clouded by distrust due to past uninvestigated and unpunished manipulations. In the days leading up to the vote, citizens again reported receiving voter invitations for people who do not live at their addresses.
- **Pressure, clientelism, and misuse of citizens' data:** During the campaign in Zaječar and Kosjerić, an atmosphere was created in which political loyalty and electoral support became conditions for access to jobs, social services, and other forms of institutional assistance—a pattern of political exchange characteristic of previous election cycles as well. CRTA recorded allegations of misuse of personal data from public institutions such as social work centers and pension funds. However, for the first time in its election observation work, CRTA documented testimonies from citizens reporting that party activists falsely posed as city officials when collecting household data, contacts, and political preferences.

CRTA's election observation mission—composed of accredited observers from CRTA and its affiliated association “Citizens on Watch”—is monitoring the campaign in full capacity and will have observers at every polling station, in front of polling stations, and in mobile teams. **These elections are of historic significance for independent citizen election observation, as citizens of Serbia themselves have funded CRTA's mission in both Zaječar and Kosjerić.**

This report is based on 700 observer reports and over 50 interviews with individuals from Kosjerić and Zaječar, alongside daily monitoring and analysis of the electoral process.